

# Addressing professional suitability in social work education: Results of a study of field education coordinators' experience

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**Abstract:** Limited research exists pertaining to field education coordinators' leadership and educational practice in general, or with respect to the specific topic of gatekeeping in social work education. This article presents the results of a Canadian study that investigates the experience and approach of field education coordinators in addressing student professional suitability concerns. This exploratory study consists of a focus group conducted with field education coordinators from across Canada, and an extensive web-based survey questionnaire administered to all current, and some former social work field education coordinators in Canada. In brief, the results of this study reinforce the perception found in social work literature that gatekeeping predominantly falls to the field component of social work education. Findings of the study provide insight into the location of field education within academia; and highlights the important leadership role undertaken by field education coordinators in supporting students, faculty liaisons, field educators, and university administration in addressing concerns related to student professional suitability. Implications for social work education are discussed.

**Keywords:** Gatekeeping, social work education, professional suitability, field education coordinator, field instructors, Faculty liaisons.

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**Date of first (online) publication:** 24th May 2013

## Introduction

The field education or practice component is integral to social work education. It is often referred to as the 'heart' of social work education. The maintenance of a quality field program is an extremely sensitive, challenging and time-consuming task. Consequently, there is a need to consider the critical role of field education coordinators (placement managers, practice learning manager, director of field) who are charged with the responsibility of coordinating and overseeing this program. There is a paucity of literature pertaining to how field education coordinators experience their work generally, or specifically how they experience gatekeeping responsibilities. The practice experiences of field education coordinators with respect to student professional suitability have been lacking from the literature, with the exception of a few articles.

The literature reflects a generally uniform view of the field coordinator as both administrator and educator. They are also viewed as placement arrangers, consultants or liaisons to field agencies, and as public relations directors and trouble-shooters, as well as having many other responsibilities of a coordinative and supportive nature. Jenkins and Sheafor's 1982 study reaffirmed the significance of this range of definitions and perceptions for the role, position and tasks of the field education coordinator. The position is often perceived as one of the most taxing jobs in social work education. Hawthorne and Holtzman note that the 'overriding quandary about the priority allocation and intermeshing of the administrative and educational functions' has been examined in a number of studies (1991, p.322). It is acknowledged that field coordinators carry 'responsibility for the interface between the school and social work agencies; this involves visibility, communication, interpretation and linkage' (Hawthorne & Holtzman, 1991, p.320). The educational and administrative responsibilities that coordinators carry for the field component of the student's learning experience are stressed, and the question of whether this is perceived as an educational or administrative position is raised.

Although faculty liaisons (tutors, off-site practice educators) and field instructors (practice assessors, practice teachers, on-site practice educators) share in the responsibility to address professional suitability concerns once the practicum has commenced, field education coordinators play a pivotal role in providing students with initial access to the contexts of practice. By virtue of their location within the educational nexus, field education coordinators engage in informal assessment of personal characteristics and

professional qualifications prior to and during the placement process in order to meet the particular needs of students, and to anticipate potential concerns in order to place the student appropriately, and safeguard clients served within the practicum process. Canadian accreditation standards require that students complete a minimum of 700 practice hours at the baccalaureate level, and the majority of programs include one field placement in the third, and one in the fourth year of the program. Field education coordinators are also often called upon by field instructors and faculty liaisons during the practicum process to problem solve and mediate conflicts when students experience difficulties or are at risk of not completing the field placement. Furthermore, if a second placement is deemed to be appropriate, they are also charged with securing another placement following the termination of the initial placement. As a result, they often find themselves engaged in gatekeeping activities to address legitimate concerns, or they find themselves monitoring faculty and field gatekeepers in an attempt to buffer students from harsh or unfair processes, scrutiny or judgement.

In the majority of Schools of Social Work in Canada, field education coordinators are faculty members, however in some instances they are employed in administrative, management or staff positions. Some field education coordinators are hired through external postings specifically designated as field education coordinator positions, whereas others may transition into the role through internal mechanisms within individual schools. The qualification requirement for the role varies between schools with some requiring a completed doctorate or PhD, and others requiring a Masters of Social Work degree.

## **Lessons learned**

Results of the Memorial University lawsuit in Newfoundland, Canada travelled like wildfire through schools of social work across Canada in 2006. It was only natural that faculty and university administration had a desire to be informed about this lawsuit to avoid the plight of Memorial University in having to award over \$800,000 to a student after the Supreme Court of Canada had determined that a professor and director had not exercised a duty of care in responding to a student concern (Young v. Bella, cited in Redmond & Bright, 2007). In this particular case without

consulting with the student, a social work professor with the support of a director reported the student (Wanda Young) to child protection authorities as a potential threat to children on the basis of an assignment she submitted in an introductory prerequisite social work course (Armstrong, 2006; Redmond & Bright, 2007). Although this incident occurred within a classroom context there are lessons to be learned by all field/practice educators as the implications for this case are far reaching.

Newspaper headlines and other collegial hearsay stimulated much discussion between social work colleagues as to whether the professor had exercised her gatekeeping responsibilities appropriately, and done the right thing by reporting the student to child welfare on the basis of content in an essay. Although there was a duty to report cases where one has evidence of potential child abuse and neglect to the child welfare authorities in Newfoundland, some faculty members expressed curiosity about the process that was employed in arriving at this response.

A few years later after being declined admission to the BSW program, and finding out that her name was in a Child Abuse Registry, Young sued the professor, director and the university for damages for defamation and negligence. It was later confirmed through the court process that the essay content that prompted Bella to report Young to child welfare authorities was quoted from a text that Young had neglected to reference within the paper. Defamation is unusual grounds for litigation in higher education and the court concluded that there was no evidence to support a finding in this regard. However, evidence for the claim of negligence was successful and Young was awarded \$839,400 on the basis of damage to her career prospects. Given the power differential between professor and student acknowledged by the court, the lesson learned from a legal perspective is that one must exercise a duty of care for students (Armstrong, 2006; Redmond & Bright, 2007). Thus educators must apply only those policies and procedures that reflect the duty of care owed by professors to students. Therefore it is critical that all social work educators, including field education coordinators understand their legal obligations; and are informed about student' rights and the law before proceeding to address concerns of professional suitability.

Gibbs and Macy capture the essence of gatekeeping very well in the following statement. 'Few program operations are viewed as more complex, troublesome, and emotionally charged than the gatekeeping component of the educational enterprise. And few program operations are imbued with

more mystery and misunderstanding' (2000, p.3). *Gatekeeping* is generally understood to mean closing the gate to prevent students who are not deemed suitable from entering the profession. Somewhat paradoxically, gatekeeping is also seen by some as a process whereby students are nurtured through the educational experience ensuring they succeed in completing the program, regardless of their perceived suitability. However, social work literature emphasizes the ethical responsibility of educators to fulfill a gatekeeping role (Barlow & Coleman, 2003; Gibbs & Macy, 2000) particularly within the field component of social work education (Miller & Koerin, 2001; Raymond, 2000; Tam, 2004). Likewise, article 3.9.2 (bachelor level) and 5.9.2. (master level) of the Canadian Association for Social Work Education (CASWE) Educational Policy Statements reinforces gatekeeping responsibilities of educational programs in stating that:

Schools shall also have published policies and procedures providing for the termination of those social work students found to be engaging in behaviour contrary to the relevant social work Code of Ethics, and therefore are judged to be unsuitable for the profession of social work. (October 2007, p. 6 & 8)

Educational institutions are required to serve as first-line gatekeepers to the profession (Barlow & Coleman, 2003; Cole & Lewis, 1993). The duty of educators to be gatekeepers for the profession is reinforced as an ongoing seemingly simple, but complex issue. Born and Carroll argue that 'a more ethical approach to gatekeeping is a multi-tiered approach, which begins with the decision to admit or reject and continues through graduation and licensure' (1988, p.82). The various points include: before admission, during completion of introductory and core coursework, skills labs, within classroom assignments, before entry into the field placement, during the field experience, and at graduation (Gibbs, 2000; Moore & Urwin, 1990). Moore and Urwin (1990) stress the need for quality control in classroom instruction, field education, and student evaluation. However, regardless of the measures used, 'studies of the admission practices of social work programs suggest that admission screening does little in the way of gatekeeping' (Kropf, 2000, p.64) and the predictive validity of current academic and non-academic admissions criteria is questionable. Cole and Lewis (1993) note that studies have found that very few students are terminated from undergraduate and graduate social work programs. In some instances this may be due to fear of possible legal ramifications.

However, professional suitability concerns may not be brought to

light or become clearly apparent within the classroom context through written assignments and scripted role play exercises, or faculty struggle with how to address concerns within this context. Crisp and Green Lister (2002) note the lack of literature regarding classroom-based assessment methods. Thus often it is in the field placement where issues of professional suitability become apparent. Field is noted as the most productive place to identify concerns (Tam, 2004). 'Without careful monitoring and accurate evaluation of student field performance, the "field is an accident waiting to happen"' (Cole & Lewis, 1993, p. 258).. Hartman and Wills (1991) agree that screening-out unsuitable candidates is clearly a function of field education. Ryan, McCormack and Cleak also view field as the main arena in which a student's competency for practice is assessed (2006). Moore and Urwin (1990) argue that the field is where the difficulties of gatekeeping are most clear and where gatekeeping takes on its most concrete function. Thus, the gatekeeping role of the practicum places direct responsibility on all those involved in field education. However, failing a student in a practicum is a complicated task and can present many dilemmas.

While the gatekeeping efforts of field instructors and faculty liaisons have been explored in the literature (Furness & Gilligan, 2004; Jenkins, Moore & Dietz, 1996; Lafrance, Gray & Herbert, 2004; Ligon & Ward, 2005; Moore, Dietz & Jenkins, 1998; Moore & Urwin, 1991; Tam, 2004), the same cannot be said of field education coordinators. Emphasis for gatekeeping is placed on field instructors (practice assessors, practice teachers, onsite practice educators) in particular, as well as faculty liaisons (tutors, off-site practice educators). This suggests social work education will benefit from research into understanding the experience and approach of field education coordinators in addressing student professional suitability. Moreover, somewhat similar to the work of Tam (2004) which examined field instructors' experiences of and attitudes toward gatekeeping, it is important we understand how field education coordinators fulfill their obligation as gatekeepers; the role they play in assisting others to fulfill this obligation; and how they respond to the ethical issues they encounter in their practice as educational leaders. Royse argues there is a need for more research on ethical dilemmas and ethical decision-making (2000).

There is a need to clarify the nature and objectives of gatekeeping responsibilities, and the means by which those responsibilities are best addressed within social work education. Given the complexity of this task, it will require a collaborative effort by all those working in the field. This collaborative effort is more likely to succeed if it is informed by a detailed

appreciation of how those currently playing gatekeeping roles understand and fulfill those roles. In particular, we need to know what they are doing that they have reason to believe should be recognized as good practice and where they believe they need further support (i.e., education, legislation and resources). Furthermore, given the central role played by field education coordinators, and the relative lack of research pertaining to this, it was important to invite those fulfilling this role to share their experiences and insights. Moreover, given that gatekeeping is an ethical responsibility, and the challenge of fulfilling that responsibility is to balance a variety of distinct considerations, it made sense that one focus of the inquiry was on how field education coordinators understand and respond to such considerations in their practice. This study addresses this lack of knowledge. The purpose of the study is to better understand the experience and approach of field education coordinators in addressing student professional suitability in social work education, so their insights can inform ongoing conversations within social work education on how we might exercise 'gatekeeping' responsibilities.

## Methodology

The primary aim of the study was to explore the nature of the experiences of field education coordinators to addressing student professional suitability, and the approaches they employ in addressing such concerns. This was accomplished through a mixed methods approach, the facilitation of a focus group, and careful design and administration of a survey questionnaire, as well as the analysis of the data.

A sequential exploratory design was employed, with data collection occurring in two phases. 'Sequential mixed methods procedures are those in which the researcher seeks to elaborate on or expand on the findings of one method with another method' (Creswell, 2009; 234). In this case, the intent was to employ the survey questionnaire method to expand on the focus group findings. Phase one consisted of the facilitation of a focus group, followed by phase two, the administration of the survey questionnaire. The intent of phase one was also to explore the topic in detail to gain a greater understanding of the perspectives of respondents, and to provide guidance for the development of the survey questionnaire. Equal weight or priority was given to both methods. The study is exploratory in nature,

and seeks to explore, understand and describe the experiences of field education coordinators.

Eight field education coordinators from across Canada participated in a focus group, and 54 field education coordinators submitted responses to a national web-based survey questionnaire. Focus group participants were from four provinces in Western, Central, and Atlantic Canada. The majority of the participants were from undergraduate programs, although a few also had responsibilities for graduate programs. There was also representation from both large and small universities and programs with the number of placements ranging from 80 to more than 250 per year, as well as from distance and face-to-face programs. All focus group participants were female with field coordination experience ranging from 1 to more than 15 years.

Given the vast geographical distance between participants in Canada it would normally be very difficult to bring field education coordinators together for a face-to-face focus group discussion. Fortunately, however, such a meeting was made possible through a national field coordinators' conference which many coordinators attended. Prior to the conference, notice of the upcoming focus group was posted on the national field coordinators' email list-serve inviting all coordinators attending the conference to participate. The posting informed potential participants that the focus group would explore the aspect of gatekeeping and educational leadership in field coordination. This was followed by a personalized recruitment and information letter sent to individuals who expressed an interest in participating in the focus group. Other than the requirement of being a field coordinator, no specific criteria were established for participation.

The focus group interview had two purposes:

1. to explore notions of gatekeeping in social work field education; and
2. to explore the extent to which these notions impacted the experience of field education coordinators as educational leaders.

It was semi-structured and utilized an interview guide with seven open-ended questions. Participants were asked to define what gatekeeping meant to them, and how they experienced and responded to such expectations in their practice. The discussion greatly aided in uncovering important aspects of the research question. Respondents were very passionate and candid about the subject, emphasizing its importance as a critical issue of concern to their practice. The responses affirmed the importance of the study as all



the respondents agreed that the issue of professional suitability in social work is a valid and crucial area of study. The focus group specifically provided an opportunity to learn how participants spoke about gatekeeping and their perceptions and beliefs about this aspect of their work.

Administration of a survey provided a logical next step in the research design given the small number of participants in the focus group, and the time, geographical, and financial constraints of interviewing all field education coordinators. The relative small number of field education coordinators also made it feasible to administer a national web-based survey inviting all current and a number of former field education coordinators in the sample. A national survey provided a valuable means of gaining understanding and insight into what the experience and approach of field education coordinators from across Canada is in addressing student professional suitability and to build on the findings from the focus group. The comprehensive nature of the data obtained from the survey complemented the more detailed picture obtained from the focus group data.

Eighty-two (67 current and 15 former) field education coordinators from all 35 accredited universities across Canada were invited to complete the survey. Of these 35 universities, 11 were located in Western Canada (6 British Columbia, 1 Alberta, 2 Manitoba, 2 Saskatchewan), 20 in Central Canada (12 Ontario, 8 Quebec), and 4 in Atlantic Canada (2 New Brunswick, 1 Nova Scotia, 1 Newfoundland). Email messages with individual survey links were sent to 82 coordinators (74 English and 8 French). Former coordinators whose contact information was posted on university websites and previous field coordinators' lists were invited to participate. The most current national field education coordinators' list and all university websites in Canada were consulted to generate a list of all current coordinators in Canada to include in the study. Five email messages bounced back, of these, all five were current, bringing the total number of survey invitations received by coordinators to 77 (62 current and 15 former). Given that all current field education coordinators and a number of former coordinators were included in the sample, representativeness and generalizability of the results was not a concern.

The survey questionnaire was pre-tested with four field education coordinators, and minor changes were incorporated before administering. The English version of the survey was deployed in early March 2009, followed by the French version a few weeks later. A licensed translator from the Society of Translators and Interpreters of British Columbia was employed

to translate the survey and subsequent French responses. A 70 percent response rate was achieved, with 54 of 77 respondents submitting survey responses. Of the 54 survey respondents, 72 percent ( $n=39$ ) were current field education coordinators, and 28 percent ( $n=15$ ) were former education coordinators, and responses were representative geographically. Although representation from Atlantic Canada appeared low, given that there are fewer programs in this region, this level of participation was sufficient. The representation of French-speaking field education coordinators is also noteworthy, and the gender demographic is consistent with the literature in that 91 percent of the 54 respondents identified as female.

Care was taken in developing the survey to minimize bias, and maximize the value of responses. The following section headings were used within the survey to introduce respondents to specific topic areas and signal when topics were changing: Purpose of the Study, Specific Examples, Specific Professional Suitability Concerns, Professional Suitability Policy, Prevalence of Concerns, Role Expectations, Measures for Addressing Concerns, Criminal Record Checks, Canadian Association for Social Work Education (CASWE) Accreditation Standards, Professional Development, Final Recommendations, and Demographics. Detailed demographic information was sought in order to develop profiles of individual respondents.

## Results

Survey results greatly enhanced the focus group findings. The quantitative data and results from the survey, reinforce the interpretation of the qualitative findings from both the focus group and survey questionnaire, and provide a sense of the proportion of respondents with similar and different experiences. The narrative accounts associated with the various themes provide a detailed account of the experience and approach of focus group respondents in addressing student professional suitability concerns; their notions of gatekeeping in social work education; the impact of these notions on their experience; and the factors that influence their approach.

In sum, both focus group and survey respondents supported the assertion that gatekeeping predominantly falls to the field component of social work education. Focus group respondents indicated that, other than accreditation standards, there are no formal or explicit gatekeeping expectations placed on them by others. However, survey respondents

indicated they perceive the field to hold the highest expectation of them to assess and address student professional suitability, followed by faculty, administration, the accreditation body, and students. Consequently, they assign a high level of importance to having an approach to addressing student professional suitability concerns within their practice.

Yet, focus group respondents emphasized that current notions of gatekeeping as potentially oppressive and contrary to social work values, creates tension in their experience. While the majority of focus group respondents emphasized gatekeeping as an 'ethical obligation,' they expressed ambivalence to formally declaring themselves as 'gatekeepers' due to the negative connotation associated with the concept of gatekeeping. In the words of one focus group respondent:

*It (gatekeeping) has flags all over the place because as social workers you hate to think of yourself as a gatekeeper. It has a negative connotation, it's denying, it's excluding, it's using power against, there's a whole pile of phrases that we relate to that term, and I think in the field coordinator's role it's particularly problematic.*

The perceived power dimensions and potential to misuse this power was highlighted. In addition to expressing this reservation, some respondents called attention to how the perception of their role as educators or social workers influences their declaration and engagement in gatekeeping activities.

On the other hand, both groups of respondents acknowledged how the lack of clear criteria for assessing suitability impacts their ability to address suitability concerns. Furthermore, when asked about the formal criteria for determining suitability within school policies and accreditation standards, the majority of survey respondents reported not having professional suitability policies in place within their school, and many expressed the view that further articulation of standards is required at the accreditation level. Similarly, in Tam's study, '34.5% of respondents [field instructors] in this study reported the lack of clearly defined standardized criteria, and another 25.0 % reported the lack of policies for failing a student, were difficulties they encountered in the process of evaluating students' fieldwork performance' (2004, p.175). A few focus group respondents within this study also highlighted the distinction between consideration of 'personal' and 'professional' suitability criteria, with a preference for the latter. Similarly, one survey respondent emphasized the framing of their professional suitability policy as a professional 'conduct' policy. Challenges

aside, the majority of focus group and survey respondents acknowledged engaging in several measures to address professional suitability at various stages of the field placement process. However, a few acknowledged how workload pressures and program size and formats create an unreasonable burden of responsibility.

When asked about the level of responsibility they have for addressing concerns prior to and after the commencement of field placements, the majority of survey respondents assigned a high to moderate level of responsibility for both, whereas, this was slightly higher after the commencement of field placements. Thus, they report having a high level of involvement in field matters when concerns regarding student professional suitability arise. Hence, they report taking an active leadership role with faculty, field and students when requested to address specific concerns. Moreover, as outlined in table 1 and 2 overleaf, they report employing a number of pre- and post-placement measures for addressing suitability concerns.

More than half of survey respondents reported that the number of concerns had remained constant for the two to five years prior to the study. Similarly, more than half of the survey respondents reported being confronted by concerns related to student professional suitability four to five times (34%) and more than five times (23%) one to two years prior to the study. Furthermore, the majority of respondents (67%) indicated they had placed students whose professional suitability was questionable. Likewise, within Tam's study 'approximately one quarter of the respondents [field instructors] had one or more students whom they considered unsuitable to practice social work. Moreover, slightly over one quarter of respondents had supervised students who had not internalized social work values' (2004, p.173). On the other hand, when asked to outline specific examples where concerns were raised about a student's lack of suitability, survey respondents listed a range of examples from blatant and disturbing to minor and questionable. Still, when asked how they define professional suitability, and when someone is considered professionally unsuitable, more than half of respondents evoked the Code of Ethics and its relationship to students' suitability.

Several respondents also acknowledged operating in legal uncertainty, in some cases through engaging in practices that had not been vetted through formal channels, as noted in the focus group. Likewise, survey respondents also noted a need for further legal knowledge. On another note, the role of intuition was highlighted as an asset by the majority of focus group

Table 1  
Pre-placement Measures ( $n = 38$ )

Specific Measures	%
Meet individually with students if needed	95
Consult faculty regarding specific students prior to placement	87
Students submit resumes	87
Place students in particular field settings	87
The Code of Ethics is outlined in Field Education Manual	84
Match students with specific field instructors	79
Students submit an application for field placement	79
Facilitate pre-placement field preparation seminars	79
Share potential student/agency/field instructor matches with faculty	74
Share specific student information with faculty and field with student's permission	71
Discuss professional suitability requirements with field instructors	71
Review third year student field correspondence to facilitate fourth year placements	68
Students submit learning objective forms	63
Match students with specific faculty liaisons	61
Professional suitability policy is outlined in the Field Education Manual	55
Involved in admissions processes	55
The Code of Ethics is discussed within the pre-placement process	53
Assign myself as the faculty liaison	45
Professional suitability policy is discussed with students prior to placement	34
Students sign an oath of confidentiality	32
Provide faculty liaisons with student practicum files from third year	24
Students sign a conduct agreement	16

Table 2  
Post-placement Measures ( $n = 38$ )

Specific Measure	%
Take an active leadership role with faculty, field and students	79
Meet individually with faculty when requested	74
Facilitate concurrent field instructor sessions during the field placement process	50
Facilitate field review meetings at midterm with faculty liaisons	37

participants, and a few survey respondents also implied this. On the other hand, as noted the Code of Ethics also figured prominently in guiding many respondents' approach to practice and assessment of professional suitability. Respondents in this study emphasize the need for professional judgement in their work, as well as a collaborative and collective approach to practice. Moreover, all respondents emphasized the collective responsibility of schools of social work to fulfill gatekeeping responsibilities, and stressed that this should not fall to the field alone. All respondents emphasized the critical importance of strongly collaborative and cohesive field teams to their practice. The central location of the field education coordinator position, and the accompanying challenges were also underlined. Finally, both groups also expressed concern for the lack of institutional support in matters related to addressing student professional suitability. Focus group respondents expressed concern for the lack of institutional support in the deliberation of a few disconcerting cases.

Notwithstanding, many survey respondents indicated areas of apprehension with respect to program fulfillment of the gatekeeping role, and noted that concerns are often deferred to the field, and are not shared with them prior to the placement process. Similarly, the role and involvement of field instructors in addressing concerns was also emphasized by a few respondents. Furthermore, several respondents expressed the need for more support for their role and the field program in general within their school, and expressed concern for an apparent lack of institutional support for addressing professional suitability. Consequently, the influence of school and university administration was noted as important to respondents' experiences. For example, respondents noted how the leadership styles of deans/directors and program chairs influences their approach and deliberation of particular concerns.

Although the majority of survey respondents reported relative satisfaction with their skills and knowledge for addressing concerns, the majority suggested that further training and education would be beneficial, and strongly recommended that faculty, field, and administration be included in this education. However, many respondents expressed concern for the workload pressures, and the need for more time, support, and resources to field programs. Moreover, they also emphasized that further opportunities for dialogue and consultation between field education coordinators, as well as with faculty, administration, and field educators is needed. Specifically, they stressed a collaborative approach to addressing student professional suitability concerns.

## Discussion

Findings of the study provide insight into the location of field education within academia, and the context in which they practice, and highlight the critical role of the practicum in comprehensive gatekeeping. As noted, such responsibility is emphasized within the CASWE Standards for Accreditation. Respondents emphasized the need for clearer criteria and processes for addressing professional suitability, and for more opportunities for dialogue among coordinators, faculty, administration, and field educators regarding the issue of gatekeeping. Although the majority reported relative satisfaction with their skills and knowledge, they suggested that further training and education (legal knowledge, ethical practice frameworks, and mediation) would be beneficial, and strongly recommended that faculty, field, and administration be included in this education.

Although professional suitability concerns are few in number, given the power and influence social workers exercise over people's lives, common sense would stress the ethical imperative for all the players in social work education to prevent students who demonstrate an inability to function within the parameters of professional expectations from entering the profession. Social workers often serve the most vulnerable and marginalized groups in society, and possess an enormous amount of power and influence over people's lives. Therefore, there are serious ethical ramifications for not addressing student professional suitability concerns when they arise.

## Strengths and limitations of the study

This study highlights the location and expectations of field education coordinators, current challenges and practice approaches, and stimulates needed dialogue within education in social work and other helping disciplines. Inevitably such research provides a richer understanding of educational leadership provided by field education coordinators, and may influence future policy, planning, procedures, and practice decisions with respect to addressing concerns of professional suitability in social work education. Ultimately, such work also demystifies the process of gatekeeping within field education and provides a better understanding of how field education coordinators and others balance their responsibilities to both students and the profession.

Sixty-three percent of all current coordinators, and 100 percent of all former coordinators responded to the survey. Furthermore, of the 70 percent who responded to the survey, 69 percent completed all questions, while the remainder completed to varying degrees. Of the 37 completed surveys, 26 were completed by *current* coordinators and 11 by *former* coordinators. Nevertheless, the number of partial completions merits consideration, as this brings into question how the remainder of respondents would have answered some of the questions, and could be considered to limit the generalizability of the study. As in this case, 'it is possible, and quite likely, that the amount of nonresponse error within a single survey will differ across questions and question topics' (Groves cited in Dillman, Smyth & Christian, 2009, p.63). On the other hand, the representativeness of the sample mitigates this somewhat. Measurement error or incidents when respondents' answers are inaccurate or imprecise due to the wording of questions is also given consideration.

Furthermore, it is also important to acknowledge additional challenges to survey methods. According to Williamson (2002) there are several limitations of descriptive surveys. For example, one must consider *rival explanations* (threats to internal validity), it is difficult to control for rival explanations and one must be very careful to qualify statements pertaining to findings. Another example involves the *accuracy of self-report data*; the honesty of reporting is sometimes questionable due to the tendency for people to present themselves in the most positive light. Lastly, a further limitation of the survey method could be attributed to the absence of a test-retest of the survey instrument, that is, the administering of the same survey with the same respondents. This was not feasible, given time constraints for conducting the research, as well as the length of the survey, and the extent of open-ended questions.

## Implications and future research

Results of this study highlight the need for further research in this area. Given the dimensions of power associated with activities of gatekeeping, it would be useful to look at this topic through an anti-oppressive practice framework or other relevant practice approaches, such as feminist, anti-racist, structural, critical, and liberatory frameworks (Dominelli, 1988; Dominelli & McLeod, 1989; Fook, 2002; Leonard, 2001; Moreau, 1993;



Roche, Dewees, Trailweaver, Alexander, Cuddy & Handy, 1999). 'Anti-oppressive social work' represents the current nomenclature for a range of theories and practices that embrace a social justice perspective. This approach may provide a deeper understanding of the stance or perspective toward practice that influences individual approaches and reservations to addressing professional suitability.

Likewise, research into how perceptions of the field education coordinator role influence gatekeeping practices would be beneficial. Furthermore, given the growing literature on the role of various forms of intuition, including 'gut feelings' (Gigerenzer, 2007) and judgement, a natural topic for further research would be the discussion pertaining to the role of educated intuition in practice. A few of the respondents acknowledged listening and trusting their instinct or gut reactions. Others reframed this, stating this is more than a hunch, it is a highly trained, sophisticated, and well honed skill. It is a trained gut or advanced assessment skill. They also emphasized the importance of sorting through their own reactions through engagement in considerable reflection and consultation with others.

On the other hand, research specifically devoted to examination of the policy context of program delivery would also be very useful. Comparative research could be conducted in teacher or nursing field education. In addition to conducting in depth interviews within this study, inclusion of different respondent groups (that is, university faculty liaisons, course and field instructors, university and school administrators, students, and others) and additional qualitative and quantitative methods could be employed within social work and other helping disciplines. Research into the effectiveness of specific pre- and post-placement screening measures, and Tam's (2004) professional suitability scale could also be conducted, in order to determine the effectiveness of particular methods, and what improvements are needed. Instances of student professional suitability concerns could also be documented in detail, including the nature of the professional suitability concerns, and the processes employed for deliberating on such matters. It is important to engage in further research regarding how social work and other allied professional programs respond to professional suitability issues and what informs this practice. A number of methods such as case study, interview, survey, or focus group methods, as well as others could be employed. Further research into the experience of those responding to student suitability concerns and the meaning assigned to this would be a valuable contribution to knowledge within professional education.

The world of social work and other professional disciplines, and the education of future students are greatly influenced by the changing nature of the world in which we live. As changes occur, we must stay alert and lay claim to those aspects which we consider integral to graduating social work students who will maintain an anti-oppressive approach to practice, and contribute to enhancing the lives of the people they serve.

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